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# The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education

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**REPORT ON**  
**PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION**  
  
**INTERVIEWS WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF**  
  
**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
  
**AND**  
  
**INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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## SUMMARY REPORT ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT INTERVIEWS

FALL 1988

In the Fall of 1988, a series of interviews were held with Department of Education staff and with individuals at area universities involved in parent involvement research. The purpose of these interviews was to gather information on parent involvement strategies and programs of which these individuals were aware or in which they were participating. As interview participants were informed, our goal was to gather a broad range of promising practices and techniques in order to share these approaches with others in the Department and in schools and to build upon them with suggestions for additional strategies.

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the information gathered through the interviews. We plan to develop systematic and comprehensive models of parent involvement that will provide a range of approaches, for all age learners, that can be used to increase parent involvement in their children's education. In addition, we will be offering some theoretical models of parent involvement with "hard-to-reach" parents for teachers, parents, individuals in community-based settings, DOE staff, and others to consider.

### OVERVIEW OF THE INTERVIEWS

Parent involvement in their children's education, as reported on by DOE staff and university researchers, can be categorized into several areas:

- o Participation on school or program advisory councils
- o Communication with parents
- o Parent information centers and parent liaison programs
- o Training for parents
- o Parents as educators of their children
- o Parents as classroom resources





In promoting this involvement, DOE units:

- o Provide technical assistance on effective parent involvement to educators and parents through workshops, written materials, and consultation to state-level advisory councils
- o Design grant programs that require parent involvement components
- o Make referrals to exemplary programs in and out of the state
- o Participate in conferences and workshops, organized by professional and parent groups, to provide information on parent involvement strategies

In the course of each interview, people were specifically asked about strategies for reaching hard-to-reach parents and about models that involved community-based organizations. Individuals shared interesting ideas that were in place or planned in this state and others. They also indicated that a Board of Education policy on parent involvement would help to indicate the perspective of the DOE and would give "clout" to the concept of parent involvement.

Most units interviewed regretted that they were not doing more to promote and facilitate parent involvement. There was uniform belief in the value of having parents involved in decision-making, school programming, and home activities. Staff also strongly supported vehicles which help parents to gain knowledge about the schools and their goals.

## **SIX MAJOR CATEGORIES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN MASSACHUSETTS**

### **ADVISORY COUNCILS**

Several program areas reported that they encouraged and facilitated parent involvement in the advisory councils that were required or recommended in their area. The structures and functions of these advisory councils vary. In brief:

- o **Chapter 1 PACS.** No longer required by federal legislation although some have continued to function. Broad range in effectiveness across the state. PACs meet at an annual conference that reviews Chapter 1



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programs and considers improvements and changes.  
Provide several services for parents:

- o Training for parents on ways to engage in "learning activities" with their children at home
- o Skits and other activities to improve parents' ability to support children's learning
- o Speakers on a range of topics of interest to parents
- o **Head Start.** All Head Start Programs are required to have parent advisory councils that help to set policy for individual Head Start Programs.
- o **Special Education Parent Advisory Councils.** The approximately 300 SPED PACs across the state vary in their size and function. The SPED Division gives grants to external groups to provide training for some of these PACs. A grant to EDC includes training, technical assistance, gathering of resources, a survey questionnaire, and the development of a videotape.
- o **Adult Education.** All Adult Education Centers are required to have advisory councils. Center Directors have difficulty involving their clients on these councils because they are illiterate and do not have strong communication skills. Several Centers have developed advisory boards that are designed to be a training ground for future advisory council members.
- o **Occupational Education.** Parent participation is required on all vocational program advisory councils. The DOE works with local schools to provide training for parent members of councils and has developed a handbook for advisory councils.

#### NOTEWORTHY

- o Successful advisory councils are careful to address the needs of members with interpreters, child care, and transportation.
- o Some parents on councils may be more comfortable at the elementary than at the high school level.
- o Parents need to be given adequate background and information to participate effectively on councils.
- o Program directors give very strong indications of whether or not they value their councils. The success of parent advisory councils correlates directly with





the support and enthusiasm that the Director gives the Council.

### COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

The interviews indicated that schools and individual educational programs are using a broad range of approaches in order to communicate with parents. These approaches are generated at the local level and encompass traditional and innovative strategies.

The following examples indicate the range of approaches that were described:

- o Handbooks, letters, and newsletters sent home through the mail or hand carried by children
- o School calendars that provide learning activities for each day of the month
- o Flyers sent or delivered by children to parents announcing workshops, open houses, conferences, etc.
- o Conference on students' achievement
- o Hotlines established by schools and special programs to:
  - o Answer questions about the school
  - o Provide information on school events
  - o Offer tutoring assistance on homework over the phone

### NOTEWORTHY

- o School have found that the earlier in a child's school experience, and the earlier in the school year that parent involvement programs are initiated, the greater are the programs' chances for success.
- o Some vocational schools send seventh and eighth grade students and their parents letters informing them about the offerings of their schools.
- o Vocational school guidance counselors in some Boston schools make summer visits to the homes of students who are enrolled for the following September. These visits have helped to ensure that students do enroll in the fall.
- o Schools have found that they have better attendance at parent conferences when they have developed good relationships with parents. These relationships can be developed through social events at the school, phone



calls with "good news" to parents, and attempts to make a connection with parents that relates to their areas of interest.

- o Some schools use techniques such as having "old" parents bring "new" parents to school events. This pairing of families helps to introduce new parents to the school.
- o Schools use cable TV to announce open houses, school meetings, and other school events.
- o In Maine, a Parents' Magazine has been developed for all public school parents which provides information on the schools and on ways in which parents can support their children's education.

#### **PARENT INFORMATION CENTERS AND PARENT LIAISON PROGRAMS**

Parent information centers and parent liaison programs help some schools and programs to increase parents' awareness of school programs and to reach out to parents who may be "hard-to-reach" and hard-to-involve in school activities. These Centers and Programs are reaching parents in the following ways:

##### **Parent Information Centers**

- o Provide parents with information on individual schools. This information is especially helpful in communities in which parents select the school their children will attend.
- o Develop and maintain parent resource rooms that have books and toys that parents can borrow for use with their children at home.
- o Provide a space in the school where parents can meet informally before, during, and after school. This opportunity to talk with other parents is very welcome to some parents who are feeling isolated and need the support and information-sharing that often takes place.
- o Sponsor workshops that address the child rearing, "balancing act," and school related concerns of parents. These workshops cover topics such as drug and substance abuse prevention, home learning ideas for children, disciplining children, single parenting, etc.





## Parent Liaison Programs

- o Provide outreach to parents who may not connect with the school because of barriers such as language, poor experiences in school as a student, cultural barriers, child-care and transportation needs, etc.
- o Assist in the development of relationships that encourage parents to attend school functions and become involved in the life of the school.
- o Find ways to connect community-based organizations with the schools.

Concern was expressed that too often parent liaisons were not reaching their potential as proactive and innovative vehicles for communicating with hard-to-reach parents. These individuals sometimes are too school-based, talking to parents only on the telephone.

## NOTEWORTHY

- o In Holyoke, the early childhood program reaches out to parents through neighborhood centers and churches. Paid outreach workers meet with parents in these community sites and provide training in parenting and information and materials on learning activities that parents can use at home with their children. The goal of this program is to build on relationships that are developed with parents and then to make home visits where additional home-learning activities are shared.
- o In Missouri, parent liaisons are stationed in community-based sites (laundromats, markets, etc.) to talk with parents when they come to these establishments.
- o Some schools encourage their teachers to take "neighborhood walks" in which groups of teachers organize walks in the neighborhoods where many of their children live in order to meet informally with children and their parents.
- o Special education outreach workers help to screen and identify special needs children who are ready for early childhood programs. These workers also help parents to understand programs available for their children and to decide which programs best match their children's needs.
- o Schools can serve an important role in helping isolated and lonely parents connect with other parents. By



providing vehicles for these parents to become involved in the school, teachers can help to ensure that children are not kept home for companionship for the parents.

- o Vocational schools use a range of outreach efforts to recruit students for their schools: open houses for parents, siblings, and friends; booths at shopping malls which attract potential students and parents; visits to neighborhood clubs, etc.
- o County Extension Services have been successful in reaching pregnant and parenting teens in half-way houses and other community settings.
- o The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) trains young, low income parents in basic consumer, nutrition, and parenting skills. These young parents are then paid as para-professionals and recruit and train other young parents. This training occurs at libraries, churches, neighborhood clubs, homes, etc.

#### **TRAINING FOR PARENTS/PARENTS AS EDUCATORS OF THEIR CHILDREN**

Several of the DOE program areas reported that parents were receiving training in two major areas:

- o Information on more effective parenting
- o Information and ideas on ways to engage in home-learning activities with children

This training is often provided by program directors or coordinators and parent advisory councils. The training generally includes advice on expectations parents should have for their children, parents' roles in supervising school work, love and discipline, dealing with adolescents, etc. Parents are provided with materials and ideas for home-learning activities and suggestions for ways to supervise homework.

Programs for parents may provide child care and sometimes offer parallel programs for children. These programs have included "read-alouds," in which parents are coached in reading with their children. It was reported that local school staff find it more difficult to provide math workshops for parents because of parents' general discomfort with math.





## NOTEWORTHY

- o Head Start programs involve home visits in which teachers assist parents in using learning materials with their children.
- o The Blackstone-Millville pre-school has a one-way mirror which enables parents to participate in guided sessions in which they observe their own children as they play/work in the classroom. Parent discussions are held and parents are provided with ideas for at-home activities.
- o In Belmont, a school held a 7:00 a.m. workshop for parents on their role in homework. This well-attended session was followed up with written suggestions for parents.
- o Parent training programs, especially child rearing sessions targeted toward minorities and other hard-to-reach groups, may be condescending and insulting when they focus on issues such as the cleanliness of children and punctuality at school.
- o Teen parents, who are "children rearing children," have very little knowledge of how to be parents. These teen parents are often as in need of services as are their children. "Parent" involvement strategies should take into consideration the primary needs of these mothers before they attempt to address the needs of the young children of these teen mothers.
- o Parents bring pre-school children to some school programs at which the children are supervised while the parents participate in parenting sessions.
- o The Massachusetts Migrant Summer Workshop Program will provide 3-4 days of training in the spring to teachers who will participate in a summer workshop. This training will include sessions on involving parents in children's education.

## PARENTS AS CLASSROOM RESOURCES

In "regular" classrooms, parent voluntarism is common. The interviews, however, made little mention of parent involvement in the classroom. It may be that the program people interviewed are involved in "deficit" areas in which parents are handicapped by economic, linguistic, or cultural barriers. Several interviews indicated that parents may not be welcome in many schools by administrators who are not comfortable with their participation.



## NOTEWORTHY

- o In some Occupational Education Programs, parents, especially those in non-traditional careers, are invited into classrooms and to voc-ed club meetings to discuss their jobs and issues related to their career field.

## ADDITIONAL PARENT INVOLVEMENT APPROACHES

### PARENT INVOLVEMENT AS A REQUIREMENT IN FUNDED PROGRAMS

Several individuals indicated that parents are required to be involved in federally and state funded programs and in the grants process:

- o As members of teams developing funding proposals
- o As advisory councils that provide guidance and direction to funded programs

The following programmatic ideas and suggestions were offered regarding parent involvement in RFP programs:

- o Bilingual programs find that parents may be more effective on grant committees if these grants are addressing issues to which the parents can relate, such as nutrition, safety, and school expectations rather than educational or technical issues.
- o Commonwealth Inservice Institute programs can be used for parent education training.
- o Special Education has contributed to the Commonwealth Inservice Institute for the purpose of special education grants. Parents can design training programs that meet the needs of SPED parents.

### INVOLVING "HARD-TO-REACH" PARENTS IN THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Reaching out to non-involved and difficult-to-involve parents was a major concern of all interviewees. In addition to providing translation services, child care,





transportation, home visits, and telephone calls, the following strategies were suggested:

- o Develop relationships with community-based organizations and individuals who can assist the schools in reaching these parents.
- o Design in-school events that attract hard-to-reach parents: Student performances, cultural and ethnic fairs; family picnics; workshops on basic, topical issues, etc.
- o Plan programs that address what parents want to know, not what they need to know.
- o Train active parents to be effective in bringing uninvolved parents to school events.
- o Allow parents a strong voice. Parents must be part of the planning of programs for other parents because they are able to predict the programs that will be of interest.
- o Train teachers in effectively involving parents in the educational process.
- o Develop programs that reach out to parents in a variety of ways - and with a variety of formats. Flexibility is very important in stimulating parent involvement.
- o Address issues of concern to pregnant and parenting teens, who are looking for direction and assistance for themselves. Parent involvement activities must take their needs into account.
- o Develop programs which promote stronger parent participation in their children's academic life.  
Examples:
  - o Reading programs in which adult literacy students practice materials which they want to read with their children at home.
  - o Programs in which adult learners work on homework assignments that have been given to their children so that they can provide assistance at home.
  - o Adult learning programs in which young children and their parents come together for coordinated learning experiences.



### POTENTIAL MODEL PROGRAMS

- o "Schools Reaching Out," a pilot project at the Ellis School in Boston and P.S. 111 in Manhattan, is looking at a comprehensive approach to parent involvement. This pilot, which is being implemented by the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE), uses a classroom teacher who is freed up to work with parents and who is expected to train other teachers in the strategies that she finds successful. Each of these teachers has a facilitator who serves as friend and mentor. This pilot is based on the concept of "shared leadership" for schools.
- o The Lincoln Filene Foundation has developed a proposal for funding that will work to provide linking agents between mediating organizations (community-based organizations) and low income children to increase the educational and other services that students receive.
- o Mother and daughter workshops are a strong component of the Girl's Clubs in Santa Barbara, California. These workshops have sessions on a range of non-traditional careers, values clarification, life style expectations, financial planning, etc.





We would like to express our appreciation to the individuals who participated in the parent involvement interviews that contributed to this report.

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**Higher Education Interviewees:**

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